

ANNAPOLIS -- Top Democrats are pushing a plan to move up next year's primaries by three months to June 2006 to avoid leaving the party's Senate and gubernatorial nominees battered and broke with just two months before the November general election.

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. and leading Maryland Democrats on Capitol Hill want the General Assembly to pass a bill in the waning days of this year's session that would move up next year's Democratic primary to June 20. The primary is now set for the second Tuesday in September; the earlier date would allow the party's nominees more time to raise money and campaign before the general election in November.

"There is a tremendous amount of interest in this coming from our Democratic members on Capitol Hill and from our state party chairman," said Miller (D-Dist. 27) of Chesapeake Beach. "If it's going to be done it needs to be enacted this year, and it needs to be enacted soon because time is running out this session."

Miller told The Gazette that the primary could be moved up in the calendar by tacking an amendment onto one of several election-related bills that are pending before the General Assembly. Miller has a bill that would allow for early voting, and House Speaker Michael E. Busch (D-Dist. 30) of Annapolis has a bill titled "The Voters Rights Protection Act of 2005" that could serve as vehicles for the amendment.

Several obstacles must be overcome for this to happen this year. Primarily, Miller and Busch -- who disagree more often than not -- need to get on the same page.

Busch said Thursday that he has received several calls from Maryland's congressional delegation urging him to back the move, but he has strong reservations.

"My basic belief is you don't make these types of decisions based on one election and one group of personalities," said Busch. He said House Ways and Means Chairwoman Sheila Ellis Hixson (D-Dist. 20) of Silver Spring, whose committee handles election-related bills, is also resistant.

"This is an awful lot to throw on our plates at the end of session," Busch said.

Moving the primary date comes with advantages and disadvantages for Democratic candidates. The Democratic nominee for governor would have more time to regroup and raise money to take on Republican Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R), who will be sitting on as much as \$20 million in campaign cash with no opposition.

"The argument is that there is not enough time between the primary and the general," said Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley (D), a likely Ehrlich challenger next year. An earlier primary "might be a better way to go," he said. "I'll show up whether it's a May primary or a September primary."

Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D), who is also an unannounced candidate for governor, is not taking a position on the primary.

"May, June, September, October, just give me the date," Duncan said. "Whatever they want to do. I don't have a vote on that."

The Democratic effort has outraged members of the Ehrlich administration, who blasted the Democrats for trying to "change the rules" in an attempt to gain ground on the Republican governor.

Because of the costs associated with running an election, any change to the Democratic primary date would mean making the Republican primary date the same day.

Miller said that if the election change passed this session, Ehrlich would veto it and the General Assembly would come back in January and override him.

"It's unconscionable that at this point in the session there is this spate of election reform that has risen to this level," said Ehrlich's communications director, Paul E. Schurick. "Election laws

are not and should not be changed whimsically. They should only be changed after a thorough and full debate -- not under the cover of darkness in some backroom deal."

Maryland Democratic Party Chairman Terry Lierman said that moving the primary is "just one thing we're doing to try and help our candidates."

The date of the Democratic primary also has new meaning for the race to succeed retiring U.S. Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes (D). If Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele (R) runs for the seat, he is not expected to face tough primary opposition and could have \$15 million in campaign cash, courtesy of the national Republican Party.

"I think it makes sense" to move up the primary, said U.S. Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin (D-Dist. 3) of Baltimore, who has been widely mentioned as a candidate for Sarbanes' seat. Cardin has made calls to Busch urging him to push for the date change. U.S. Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D-Dist. 5) of Mechanicsville is also pushing Democrats in Annapolis to make the change.

Busch noted that many Democratic incumbents in the legislature would be resistant to an earlier primary because they would be stuck in Annapolis for the 90-day session, away from their campaign operation and their constituents.

More importantly, members of the General Assembly are barred from raising money during the session, and a challenger could use that time to highlight every single vote the incumbent makes during session.

Miller said that the original idea was to try and move the primary to May, but Lierman is pushing for a June 20 primary as a compromise to allow more campaign time for legislators.

Ehrlich acknowledged that changing the primary may carry some benefit for Duncan or O'Malley and the eventual candidate for Senate, but members of the General Assembly may be sacrificed in the process.

"There are some Democrats who have talked to us who are not wild about making this change," Ehrlich said.

An election year session is always less than exciting, but if this change is made, next year's session would accomplish very little.

"The last year of the term would become a real lame duck session because everyone is looking over their shoulder wondering what they can take home to their districts," Busch said.